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## THE SOCIOLOGICAL BASIS OF ETHICS.

CHARLES A. ELLWOOD.

THE thesis of this paper is, to use the language of a recent writer, that "we live in a system, and to achieve right ends, or any rational ends whatever, we must learn to understand that system."<sup>1</sup> That is to say, conduct, being activity of social importance, must, so far as it is thought out, be based upon social knowledge, knowledge of the interrelations of men; a science of the right or wrong of conduct, accordingly, must be based upon sociological knowledge.

In undertaking the discussion of our subject, it will be well to define, perhaps rather carefully, what we mean by ethics and sociology. By sociology the writer means the general science which deals with the laws or principles of social organization, on the one hand, and of social evolution on the other.<sup>2</sup> More narrowly defined, it is the science which deals with the origin and development, structure and function of the forms of association. Inasmuch as sociology is a positive science, it depends for its principles of interpretation upon the two antecedent sciences of biology and psychology. It is, therefore, approximately correct to say that sociology is the biology and psychology of the social life. Its problems are, on the one hand, as we have already indicated, those of the order or organization of society, including both structural and functional aspects; on the other, those of social origin and development, that is, of social evolution in the broad sense of the orderly changes in the social life. This is sociology in the narrow sense, its chief problem being, as has just been indicated, that of social evolution. Sociology is, however, sometimes used in a broad sense as a

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<sup>1</sup> Cooley "Social Organization," p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> See the writer's paper on "Sociology: Its Problems and Its Relations," in the *American Journal of Sociology*, November, 1907.

collective name for all of the social sciences,—the sciences that have directly to do in any way with the phenomena of man's collective life, such as economics and politics, for example. It is believed that it will lead to no confusion if in the discussion of our topic 'sociology' or 'sociological' is sometimes used in this broader sense as referring to the entire body of organized knowledge about human society.

By ethics the writer understands the science of right and wrong conduct, whether for the individual or for a group of individuals. Ethics, according to this view, would be, of course, a science of moral values, of moral norms and ideals. It might, therefore, be properly called, as it often has been, 'a normative science,' since it seeks to establish norms or standards for human conduct. This is not, of course, denying that ethics has descriptive portions, but these descriptive portions are strictly subordinated to its normative aspects, because the real problems of ethics are normative. Ethics, as a science, may be properly considered to include a discussion of the origin and development of moral ideas and ideals, but such a descriptive ethics is but one of the many social sciences which deal with man's collective life. Beyond these descriptive portions of ethics, then, are the questions of the nature and validity of moral ideals, the ends of action, the norms by which conduct is to be judged, and the like. These normative problems are usually considered to be the central problems of ethics; and ethics in this sense is evidently not dealing with a special aspect or phase of man's collective life, but rather with the ideal for individual and social life generally. Ethics, in its normative aspect, presents itself, therefore, not so much as a special social or historical science, but as a science lying beyond all of the positive sciences of human society, and to which all of them lead up.

The writer is well aware that there are those who declare that there can be no such thing as a normative science; that this involves a contradiction in terms, for all

norms and standards, or ideals, rest upon the arbitrary appreciations of the individual, or, as Mr. G. Lowes Dickinson would say, upon 'the dogma of personality.' Of course, if this is true, philosophical thinkers of every sort should renounce the attempt to establish a science of ethics. It seems, however, to the writer, that such a position as this is essentially at variance with all that we know of human nature and of human knowledge. All knowledge, in a certain sense, as we shall endeavor to show later, is busy establishing norms or standards by which processes may be measured or judged. It would be strange if the norms set up upon the basis of our knowledge of human nature and human society should be so much less trustworthy than the norms obtained by the physical sciences. It is true that such norms established through scientific knowledge afford no adequate sanction for conduct; for sanction must ever be primarily a subjective and individual matter, resting upon feeling.<sup>3</sup> Because a scientific norm fails to furnish a particular individual with an adequate sanction or imperative for his action is, therefore, no indication that scientific norms and normative science are impossible. A man may drink water containing typhoid germs because the germ theory of disease has appealed to him as nonsense, yet the standards established by the normative science of hygiene retain their scientific validity in spite of that particular individual's rejection of them. So, too, a man may decide that because alcoholic beverages do him no harm he sees no reason why their use should be discountenanced in the mass of men. Nevertheless, a standard of scientific validity for the relation of the mass of men to alcohol may be reached regardless of whether any particular individual accepts it or not. An individual may even commit suicide or murder and argue that from his point of view his act is justifiable, but the judgment of such an individual in no way impairs the val-

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\* It is the wrong use of this psychological fact which particularly vitiates many of the arguments used against an ethics based upon the positive sciences.

idity of a scientific judgment as to the danger of such acts to society, any more than the arbitrary judgment of a man concerning impure water will invalidate the judgment of scientific hygiene as to the relation between bodily health and pure water. The various arguments that are used, therefore, to deny the existence of scientific norms or standards in all aspects of the life process would destroy the possibility of all scientific knowledge. While normative sciences are not concerned with establishing laws of a mechanical character, they are concerned with establishing principles and standards by which activity may be judged and controlled. The normative sciences are, therefore, indispensable links between the pure sciences, the sciences of pure theory on the one hand, and the applied sciences, the sciences immediately connected with practical arts, on the other.

Now, if ethics, the normative science of human conduct, is not to base itself upon metaphysics primarily, then the question becomes, upon which of the pure sciences will it base itself? No one would contend that ethics can find any adequate basis in chemistry or physics. The question, therefore, reduces itself to whether ethics as a science of moral values should be based upon biology, psychology, or sociology, using all of these terms in their broad sense.

Scientific ethics must, indeed, rest to some extent upon biology. A part of our ethical valuations are unquestionably closely connected with those which are furnished by personal, public, and racial hygiene. All that would be claimed in this paper is that biology does not furnish an adequate basis for ethics, and that in so far as it furnishes the basis at all, it is on the side of the biology of the collective life process, not biology in its individual aspects. The inadequacy of biology as a basis for establishing norms of conduct is so generally recognized that the point need not be argued at length. The consideration of such simple elementary immoral acts as lying, stealing, disloyalty, all show that the ground for the reprobation of these acts is only remotely, if it is at all, biological.

Psychology has, of recent years, been brought forward as the chief claimant to be the basis of the scientific theory of morals, and if psychology were used in a broad enough sense, perhaps there would be little reason to object to the claim; but psychology as it has come to be defined by the professional psychologists, means the science of the forms and processes of consciousness; that is, psychology is the science of *immediate* experience, and as such necessarily becomes in practice a science of individual human nature in its conscious aspects. The problems of psychology are, in other words, problems of the individual mind, or of consciousness. It is not concerned, primarily at least, with the interrelations of individuals. As the science of consciousness, psychology, of course, can throw light upon the origin and development of moral ideas and ideals and especially upon the immediate sense of oughtness or obligation which frequently accompanies moral acts. The instincts, moreover, as has often been insisted, are without doubt sources of crude moral judgments. Much is said about the essentially 'inner nature' of morality; but this cannot mean that morality is wholly subjective in its nature, or that moral ideals are genetically developed by purely individual processes. If morality has an 'inner' nature, it has equally a 'social' nature. Psychology cannot possibly explain the grounds upon which ideals are evaluated without reference to the collective life. It is only when psychology turns from the individual to the mass of individuals and attempts to explain the collective life process that it becomes capable of explaining the origin of concrete moral values; but such psychology is sociology.

Sociology, then, as the psychology and biology of the collective life, must furnish the immediate positive foundation for a science of ethics. As has just been implied, moral values no more than other values, are a creation of the individual consciousness. All values that are socially recognized are undoubtedly products of the collective consciousness, that is, they are products of the

interaction of many individual consciousnesses. Just as economic values are formed, not upon the basis of individual utility, but upon the basis of collective utilities, so moral values are formed not upon the basis of innate tendencies or intuitions of the individual, but upon the basis of the conditions of collective life generally. We cannot explain our system of moral values, in other words, without going over from individual psychology to social psychology. All values, then, that are generally accepted are an outcome of collective life processes, not merely of individual life processes.

This is shown in another way through the fact that it is impossible to study those collective processes without perceiving the immanent values. It is impossible, for example, to study social organization without perceiving social maladjustments or possible economies not realized. It is impossible to study social changes without seeing advantageous and disadvantageous adjustments. It is impossible also to study the various types of social organization without indicating the superiority and inferiority of the various types, or to formulate a theory of social progress without implications of social obligation. This is not saying that it is mere social knowledge itself which leads to perceiving social maladjustments or economies not realized, but it is saying that, given the constitution of the human mind as it is, there immediately spring from our knowledge of social conditions certain perceptions of betterment, amelioration, or ideals; and these perceptions of improvement are not different in character from the perceptions of improvement which a physical scientist may get when he is studying a machine like a steam engine. Given, in other words, the ordinarily accepted ends of activity such as survival, harmony, and efficiency, which the common sense view of the world leads practically all men to accept, then there springs spontaneously from social knowledge a perception of ethical truth; that is, a system of ethics grows spontaneously out of a system of sociology. The human mind being constructed as it is,

the attempt to exclude ethical implications from sociology is, therefore, futile and childish, and in the writer's opinion, undesirable. It is the business of sociology to furnish the foundation for ethics, and on the other hand, it is the business of ethics to take the ethical implications which sociology affords, develop them, criticise and harmonize them. An ethics worked out upon the basis of the knowledge furnished by the natural sciences will make a larger use, therefore, of sociological knowledge than of any other form of scientific knowledge.

It is evident from what has been said that the present writer does not believe that judgments of fact and judgments of value can be separated in any such way as some writers have maintained. Knowledge of values grows directly out of knowledge of facts, and all generally accepted valuations, as has just been said, are collective processes having reference to the totality of life conditions. It is impossible to have knowledge of facts without judgments of value becoming more or less attached to those facts. In other words, judgments of value inevitably mediate between action, on the one hand, and pure or theoretical knowledge, on the other. The normative sciences, as we have just said, are necessary links between the pure and the applied sciences. Judgments of moral values are not so distinct, either, from judgments of other sorts of value. A judgment that expresses social maladjustment with reference to a certain type of social organization is not clearly separable from a judgment of moral evil. The social and the moral are, indeed, so closely related that they cannot be separated. The moral springs not only directly out of the social, that is, out of the interrelations between individuals, but it has reference to the social in that the moral functions to bring about a new and higher type of the social. The moral is, therefore, inseparable from the social, and moral values and norms cannot be understood except as they are understood as social values and norms. Moral values, therefore, mediate between social knowledge and social activity, and ethics



as a science is midway between the practical social sciences and the pure, or theoretical social sciences.

All science, as we have already asserted, is busy establishing implicit norms; thus the biological sciences are continually establishing norms with reference to survival; physical anthropology, for example, shows certain limits of stature for man beyond which he cannot vary and survive. It has been established inductively that individuals under four feet and over six feet seven inches are incapable of surviving as types because they are sterile. If some one says that adult individuals of three feet six inches are normal, the biologists will simply laugh at him. And if again some one declared that his ideal was individuals seven feet in height, the biologists might well regard him as either lacking in knowledge or in common sense. The limits of normality as regards heights for adult individuals are then, between four feet and six feet seven inches. Variations beyond these limits the biologist does not hesitate to call abnormal, but within the limits of four feet, on the one hand, and six feet seven inches on the other, judgments might well differ as to what the ideal height of an individual should be. Some might say six feet, some five and one-half feet, and biology probably could not decide between these ideals, although it might exclude, possibly, certain statures which approach the limits of normality on either side. Therefore, the ideal must lie within the limits of the normal, so far as normality is measured by the test of species survival, and this is the test which the biological sciences are coming more and more to apply in determining the normal.

Now, the bearing of all of these things upon the science of ethics is manifestly this, that the natural sciences, whether we like it or not, are establishing certain standards of normality for their own purposes; especially are biology, psychology, and sociology doing this; but these implied norms do not themselves constitute a science of ethics. They must rather be taken and worked over, criticised, and harmonized by a distinct discipline, an in-

dependent science, ethics. But one can see at once that the norms and ideals which ethics finally works out cannot be something entirely different from those which the natural sciences have furnished it as its raw material to work over. The moral ideal must lie, as has been well said, within the limits of the socially possible;<sup>4</sup> moreover, it must also lie within the limits of social normality, for the advance of social knowledge is continually showing that certain social types can survive only under certain conditions and that under other conditions they are distinctly abnormal. With reference to the test of ultimate social survival, then, sociology conceivably can deliver judgments as unquestionable as any now delivered by the biological sciences. The moral ideal must fall somewhere within the limits which sociology determines as conducive to ultimate social survival. In practice no one rejects this. The age is gone by when we can argue for the morality of things which evidently conduce to social deterioration and extinction, but it may well be that within the limits of the socially normal there are possible several ideals, and if this is possible, then it is the function of ethics to evaluate these several ideals. The socially normal may not, therefore, exactly coincide with the socially ideal, although we are still so far even from the socially normal that there are not wanting those to whom the normal seems to be the ideal.

Ethics, therefore, presents itself as a normative discipline lying beyond all of the social sciences. Inasmuch as all knowledge exists for the sake of activity, then all social knowledge exists for the sake of social action, but between social action and social knowledge must come an evaluating process which we call ethics. Ethics is not, therefore, as a science, simply one of the social sciences or subordinated in any way to the social sciences in general. On the contrary, in the writer's view, the social sciences exist for the sake of furnishing the raw material

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<sup>4</sup> Höffding, *American Journal of Sociology*, March, 1905.

for ethics. They all lead up to, and are in a sense subordinate to, ethics, though this is not saying that ethics should dictate their methods or state their problems, for we know that pure science in order to obtain knowledge of facts and their relations, must be untrammelled in practical considerations. This, however, does not mean that the knowledge of facts and their relations when once discovered, will not be of the highest practical value.

This view of ethics makes the connection between the social and moral life simple and explicit. The moral, indeed, becomes simply the normative aspect of the social; and the moral virtues become, not abstract personal qualities, but concrete social values. The virtues, according to this view, are intimately associated with social and even with institutional life. They are what fit and bind men together in harmonious relations. Accordingly, each form of association, and especially each institution, has its appropriate virtues, and these virtues, as we have said, are not mere abstractions, but are concrete realities in the social life. Thus, the family for example, has its appropriate virtues. We cannot conceive such a virtue as chastity existing apart from such an institution as the family. While this virtue may have certain metaphysical implications, yet practically, chastity exists for the sake of the family and not merely as an abstract virtue in itself. Of course all the virtues are projections into the ideal, of actual concrete relationships as we find them in the social life, and their full content and implications cannot be made out without the criticism of ethics.

When we say that the business of ethics is to develop, criticise, and harmonize the normative implications of the social sciences, the metaphysician may reply at once that such a task could not be carried out except upon the basis of metaphysics. We have not denied, at any time, that metaphysics must be the court of last resort for ethics as for all the sciences, and the very statement that ethics

must criticise the normative implications of other sciences implies, of course, that there is a work for metaphysics to do in ethics; but criticism need not be upon the basis of an absolute logic, and accordingly the critical work of ethics need not be necessarily of an ultimate or absolute character. It would seem, indeed, that the wisest course in the development of scientific ethics would be to develop and criticise the ethical implications of other sciences without appeal to metaphysical principles until the resources of other methods had been exhausted. The critical method which is used more or less by all sciences that attempt to establish standards is not necessarily, then, metaphysical, although it becomes such, of course, when pushed to its final outcome. It is, then, not because ethics does not naturally lead into metaphysics that one would counsel the development of a non-metaphysical ethics, but because absolutistic or metaphysical ethics is, apparently, a final development in the construction of the science of ethics, which is naturally preceded by the construction of a relative ethics based upon the natural sciences of biology, psychology, and sociology.

We have spoken a moment ago of the tendency of all sciences, especially of the social sciences, to establish norms, or standards, which it is the business of ethics to develop, criticise, and harmonize. What standards, then, have the social sciences developed which can be of use to ethics? While these standards are perhaps numerous and more or less conflicting at the present time, it may be said that the general trend of the development of the scientific knowledge of human society is to establish three standards or norms, all of which have ethical implications; social survival, social efficiency, and social harmony. Of these three, social survival is, perhaps, the more important in the social sciences, just as species survival is the more important in the biological sciences. The sociologists generally tend more and more to judge a social type, or a species of social organization, high or low in the scale of social development according as it conduces to ultimate

survival or not. Thus the sociologist is busy making out a scale of social forms, some of which are ill adapted to survival under certain circumstances, and some of which are conceivably better adapted. However incomplete this work may be at the present time, it is certainly conceivably possible that sociological research will be able to show limits of survival for different types under certain circumstances. While some social forms survive and are conducive to survival under conditions of savagery, these same social forms, of course, may be but poorly adapted to the more complex conditions of life. Thus the sociologists are busy working out the by no means impossible problem of what types of social relationship, or forms of association, will conduce to the survival of a people in the long run. Certainly the ideals which ethics establishes must be within the limits of what sociology determines as conducive to ultimate survival. When any form of association can be shown to be ill adapted to the survival of the group that accepts it, then certainly that form of association cannot be accepted as the ethical ideal. Thus celibacy as a type of social relationship, no matter whether it be shown to be in accord with certain abstract metaphysical concepts or not, cannot be accepted as a moral ideal for the mass of mankind, or even for any national group, because celibacy is a form of association which dooms those who practice it to extinction. Celibacy is socially possible for any particular generation, but it is not within the limits of social survival and cannot, therefore, possibly be accepted by ethics.

It is conceivably possible, then, that sociological investigation will even in the near future mark out with a distinctness and clearness that cannot be dismissed, the conditions of social survival, of social efficiency, and of social harmony; but it would be a mistake, in the writer's opinion, to consider that these determinations would of themselves constitute a science of ethics. No doubt, moral ideals may be tested by these standards of social normality, but the moral ideals which ethics seeks to set forth

are evidently not necessarily identical with the conditions of social survival, efficiency, and harmony.

In pointing out the conditions of social survival, social efficiency, and social harmony, sociology, of course, has nothing to say about these as obligations. Its point of view remains purely the natural science point of view, and if these are accepted as obligations, it must be because they appear naturally desirable. However, speaking from the standpoint of ethics, one might well contend that ethical ideals could certainly not be at variance with such natural social norms. Our ethical ideals must lie within the limits of the social survival, social efficiency, and social harmony of humanity, and not outside of them, if ethics is to be a science of the good for man. Ethical ideals, as has already been shown, are derived genetically from the social life and they must fall, moreover, within certain limits which natural science knowledge of human society imposes. Therefore, it is not too much to say that ethical ideals are to be derived by a process of criticism from social knowledge. This criticism, as we have already pointed out, may become metaphysical if pushed to its ultimate limits, or it may be simply a relative criticism. In any case, if sociology, as the biology and psychology of the collective life, is the missing key for the development of the special social sciences, then it is also the missing key for the development of ethics as a science of social ideals. Ethics from this view, we repeat, presents itself as a great normative science lying beyond the pure or theoretical social sciences, and to which they all lead up. Ethics is, indeed, not so much the handmaid of these sciences as these sciences are handmaids of ethics.

In this view there would seem to be but little to which the most enthusiastic champion of the position of ethics among the sciences could object to. Yet it is strange that we have even at the present time certain ethical thinkers who strenuously object to basing ethics in any sense upon sociology or the social sciences. Thus, Professor Adler, for example, in his address before the International Con-

gress of Arts and Science at St. Louis, in 1904,<sup>5</sup> took the position not only that the social sciences cannot furnish ethical imperatives, but also that ethics should remain essentially independent of the social sciences. He argued, in other words, for the development of a subjectivistic ethics, an ethics resting primarily upon the criticism of the moral judgments of the individual. While what he says does not show clearly whether he would make this criticism a metaphysical one, there can be no question but that he argued for the essentially 'inner' nature of morality and denied that moral theories might be in any degree safely rested upon objective social knowledge. Nevertheless, in his excellent little book on "Marriage and Divorce," Professor Adler accepts very clearly the sociological basis of morality. His argument in defense of the family and against free divorce is very manifestly a social argument. The criterion which he lays down when he says that "the highest end of marriage is to perpetuate, promote and enhance the spiritual life of the world," is manifestly a social criterion. Indeed, it is very difficult to distinguish this criterion from the criterion of social survival as used by the best sociologists of to-day. Professor Adler might reply that this 'highest end' is not derived from the social sciences, but is simply an arbitrary *a priori* principle which he accepts as an individual but which any individual has likewise a right to reject. If this is true in a totally unconditional sense, then there is manifestly no place for a science of ethics. Professor Adler, however, is not the only moral individualist who has been inconsistent in insisting upon a subjective criterion for morality and then later adopting practically an objective one. It is notorious that Kant, the greatest of all the moral individualists, did the same thing, insisting, on the one hand, on the inner nature of morality, while in his maxim of the Practical Reason<sup>6</sup> he set up as a moral criterion a social principle.

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<sup>5</sup> *Proceedings Congress of Arts and Science*, Vol. VII.

<sup>6</sup> Kant's "Critique of Practical Reason," Abbott's edition, p. 119.

Indeed, every moral individualist who attempts to base ethics entirely upon purely subjective factors finds himself in the same difficulty. Thus no one can discuss a practical moral question without reference, as we have already seen, to social criteria. If one argues for the existence of the family as an institution to-day, he can scarcely do so in terms of abstract principles and concepts, but finds himself forced to argue in social terms. Indeed, the existence of the family as an institution must first find social justification before it finds metaphysical justification. Unless we can show, in other words, that the family is necessary for the survival of our present complex societies, and all types more complex, our metaphysical arguments for the continuance of the family as an institution will avail but little. If, on the other hand, those who are in favor of the abolition of the private family can show that the family is not necessary but a hindrance to the survival and efficiency of complex societies, then the argument for the abolition of the family in the minds of many would be practically validated. This is not denying, of course, that there remains to metaphysics a question of determining why we should prefer the survival of one sort of social type, such as the complex society of the present, to another sort of social type, such as the simple societies of primitive savagery.

It is hardly necessary to say that a large and growing school of ethical writers take substantially the position adhered to in this paper. More and more, indeed, moral individualism as the basis of scientific ethics is being given up; and this implies that more largely than ever before the intimate relations of the social and moral are recognized and that social knowledge is perceived to be requisite for a scientific discussion of ethical problems. The personal interest, however, of most ethicists in furthering the development of the social sciences and particularly of sociology seems to the writer lamentably small. If the development of ethics as a science depends upon the development of sociology, then the scientific ethicist and



the scientific sociologist should work hand in hand, for they are both ultimately working at the same problem,—human welfare; the ethicist directly, the sociologist indirectly.

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## POST-KANTIAN IDEALISM AND THE QUESTION OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY.

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THE Idealistic thought of the early nineteenth century undertook the vindication of the spiritual rights of man, intellectual, moral, æsthetic, and religious. Yet the Idealism directly descended from it is accused, on all sides, of having neglected man's higher interests, especially his religious and moral interests. I wish here to treat one aspect of this general charge. It was accentuated by Professor James so long ago as 1899, and has rather gained than lessened in popularity since. It is to the effect that *the idealistic account of human freedom does not satisfy the moral consciousness*.

The charge arises, really, from the large grace which idealism has shown towards the scientific demand for law and uniformity. It may be put thus: If the universe be what idealism allows that it is, an unbroken manifestation of law throughout, can any justification be given to the ordinary man for assuming any longer that he is a free and responsible being?

To put the issue in this sharp way brings into view one of the first conditions of an answer. It depends on what exactly the common man assumes. To decide this is our first task. We are apt to forget that there is any preliminary question of this kind. We are apt to think that all we need is the common man's report of what his own assumption is,—that that is bound to be correct. If